

THE HISTORICAL BASIS OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theology is basically a relationship between an intellectual and social environment and a central mystery of the Christian belief - God. It is the response to a series of questions, which the men of a particular environment pose to the central inalienable truths of Christian belief; questions born out of the pressures of their society, their range of sensitivity, their perplexities, and their imagination. Christianity is a universal religion; but theology is a particular enterprise; particular because it means patient and perceptive reflection based on particular and peculiar experience. To demand a universal theology is to demand of men what they cannot do: perceive phenomena in the same ways despite the differences in their historical circumstances which create differences in their perception.

If all that is true, it follows that no theology can be ultimate. But if not ultimate at least theology can be urgent: because it is a discipline which does two things. It makes the particular relationship between a people at the particular moment of their history with the eternal verity somewhat clearer and therefore more compelling; and it helps the men so placed to understand themselves more clearly, to plumb their depths more imaginatively and to see their own history with more perspective. In other words, it should create in men a detachment from their society which enables them to get its features into focus without destroying their attachment to the society which maintains love and involvement. Theology therefore, despite its name, is as much about man as it is about God; because the relationship is a two-way business and a man's understanding of himself at any particular time should be the work of prophetic theology as his understanding of the demands made upon him by the central challenge of history - God - is also a result of a prophetic theology.

Having made this dangerous incursion into a region where angels fear to tread I must now reflect on the way history has conditioned theology in the past and the importance of our own Caribbean history for helping to inform, if not to shape, our theological reflections.

It is an old cliché that christianity is an historical religion, because its central event took place, not on a cosmic, timeless level, but on a local, time-bound plane. But christianity, like all other religions, is historical in another sense: its development in time and the area of its greatest initial success have shaped its classical theological expression, informed its structure and created its imagery.

Christianity began its journey through the world as the "outlandish" mystery religion of a minority of Jewish mal-contents, who had a compulsion to convert the world, and whose compulsion communicated itself to boorish mal-contents in the cities of the Roman Empire. It was in fact the dissident offspring of a highly dissident nation whose racial and theological exclusiveness the sophisticated classes of the tolerant, eclectic Roman Empire could not understand and frequently did not tolerate. But in order to make mileage with their message, Christians increasingly found themselves having to interpret their own fledgling theology in the sophisticated terms of the upper classes of the Empire; and when Christianity became a respectable institution it adopted the Greek ways of expression and of rationalization and the process known as the Graecization of Christianity began.

This was not surprising, for men accustomed to Greek forms of questioning or Greek forms of reflection could not approach the new religion from points which they could not comprehend. They had to make sense of it in terms of the intellectual discourse and social milieu they respected. They could only perceive it within the range of sensitivity they possessed. In short, the point of historical development to which they had reached predicated their questioning and speculation; and the Graecization of christianity was neither a disaster nor a denial: it was enevitable, part of an historical gravitational pull whereby men can only start where they are and carry with them on their excursion to new realms plenty of cultural baggage, some of it quite unknown to them, which they cannot put down.

This was the great period of absorption for the Christian church; absorbing the high culture and the profoundly speculative bent of the intelligentsia of the Roman Empire, making Christ into the Divine Logos - bringing Platonism into the simplicities of the Gospel and responding to its mysteries with mysticism; and sometimes even making a religion of salvation into a religion of disputation.

But what I call the theology of absorption really had two stages. In its exposure to the Roman Empire, the Church began in a position of cultural insecurity vis-a-vis the prestigious, powerful and magisterial nexus of Rome. The Church, therefore, through the work of its more sophisticated converts absorbed the atmosphere, the hierarchy, and many of the cosmic presuppositions of the Greek and Roman world, and approached the relationship between man and God with this technique of absorption.

Later on, it was to practice another form of absorption. When the Church became culturally magisterial the Empire became politically impotent. The people whom the Romans called the "Barbarians" began their inroads into the Empire; and to preserve its magisterial position, as well as to achieve a new form of political equipoise in which it had a dominant position, the church took on the task of domesticating the Barbarians by absorbing their psychic depths into its faith and even into its theology. It made a creative synthesis between Jewish messianism, Greek and Roman speculation, and barbarian symbolism. This gave to Christian theology a number of levels: rational and speculative, historical and redemptive, symbolistic and mysterious; and the large areas of interpenetration between them was an index of this tremendous absorptive capacity; a capacity at one and the same time dogmatic and eclectic.

It is worthwhile to notice that if Christianity had taken other admissions than those of the Roman Empire, in other words if it had gone East from Judea instead of West, its range of perception would have been different, its speculations would have been cast in other moulds and its symbols would have been taken from other frameworks of experience.

The difference between the first great age of christian expansion (that is between the second and the eight centuries A.D.) and the second great age of christian expansion (which ran from Vasco da Gama to Mahatma Ghandi) is crucial for our theological investigation and for our point of departure in the Caribbean.

The first great age of christian experience was an age of theological absorption. The second great age of christian expansion was an age of theological imposition. At the beginning of the second great age of christian expansion christianity was the religion of Europe; and Europe was endowed with

the energy and acquisitiveness to burst its own confines by sea and to sail around the world in order to make the old lands that it came upon or the new lands it discovered extensions of European confidence and greed. The Reformation with its internal European dissensions somewhat interrupted this period of expansion but by the end of the eighteenth century it was in full flush once again and by that time christianity was a religion of robust self-confidence, rooted in two continents - the first Europe which having burst its confines was greating the world as its oyster; and the second the United States which having cut its apron strings from Europe was treating first its own backyard, then Latin America, and finally the world as the proper field of its imperial entrepreneurship. Because christianity was so integral to the life and institutions of these two regions it carried with its expansion the messianic self-confidence of Europe and America. It was concerned to impose its theological solutions on those whose persons and cultures it set about to "redeem". In fact it was going to reorder their perceptions, reword their questions, explain away their perplexities or reinterpret them in terms of the perplexities of Euro-America and thus behave as if the history of these non-European peoples began with the arrival of the first missionary "Except he be born again he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God or the Kingdoms of Europe."

There is a sense in which this historical religion in contact with the peoples who became the object of imperialism, forgot its own historical antecedents; and what is more, forgot that perception and questioning and the stance from which a relationship in theology proceeds is the product of a peculiar history. Theology was going to be a way of remodelling men, making them into new beings: as was said of the British in relation to the natives so it could be said of theologian missionaries in relation to their converts. "They did not defeat their old conceptions they merely disqualified them." One of the Governors of Sierra Leone in the nineteenth century graphically put his finger on the christian attitude of imposition when he wrote: "Baptism is an act of civilization", by which he meant that by making a man a christian was the sure highroad to making him into a brown or black European. There was a great debate in the nineteenth century over the conversion of Africans and Asiatics conducted in terms of a famous alternative: whether it was more effective to make a man first a European in secular things so that he would readier accept christianity or whether it was better to make him a christian first so that he would readier accept European

things. The whole debate is an index of how far European missionaries and theologians saw their civilization and the christian religion as merely two sides of the same coin. It is not surprising therefore that the major adjunct of the missionary was the school, for it was in the school that the old conceptions of the convert were to be thoroughly erased and on the new clean slate was to be written the prescriptions, postures and postulates of European man.

The theology of imposition produced from those on whom it was imposed few genuine theologians. For though they learnt - as I learnt - to enjoy the intellectual discipline of theology, it was for most of them a mechanistic exercise playing with concepts, bandying distinctions and refinements, teasing abstractions with abstractions, but not a discipline possessed of an existential urgency born of the pressures of their own society. The reaction of colonials to a theology of imposition was the theology of imitation. It could not be creative. For it was the subsuming of oneself into a system already made rather than the appropriating and therefore the modifying of the system to one's existential condition. It was basically a way of ignoring the environment, the social arrangements, and the hidden assumptions: the historical experience. But this is the stuff of which the beginnings of theology are made, that is if we see our theology as an exercise of exploration informed by a framework of experience.

This brings me to what I conceive to be the task of Caribbean theology, which is in one sense a theology of exploration. Exploration is a continuous process of interaction between two things: [^]the increasing knowledge the explorer has of himself. Exploration is therefore a relationship between subject and subject, that is, if it is properly conducted, and as it proceeds so it changes both subjects conceptually and actually.

In order to explore the relationship between God and Caribbean Man, it is necessary for Caribbean Man to do more exploration of himself, his environment and the forces which have given that environment their peculiar structure, in other words, his history.

So far we have lived in an intellectual tradition, if you will pardon the euphemism, in which we saw ourselves as on the way to Europe or more recently on the way to North America. Now we must develop a method of seeing ourselves as on the way, surely, but not to anybody else's context or continent; but a way which we can work out for ourselves when we discover what we are made of.

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We certainly have a destiny, but at the moment it is not manifest. If, however, we believe that history is a joint enterprise between God and man then we must know something more about Caribbean Man - in - his - place before we could tell in what directions we can creatively respond to the challenge to work at the enterprise with God.

This brings me to the peculiar position of Caribbean man. Columbus having discovered the Amerindians, the only true natives of the Region, began engineering their extermination; and except for small portions of the Caribbean mainland, the Caribbean islands became societies artificially created by Europeans to satisfy Europe's economic appetites, and composed of peoples drawn from differing traditions and differing histories. This has a number of profound implications for Caribbean Man and for the initiation of a Caribbean theology. First, it predicates a peculiar search for identity in a largely ancestorless society. Second, the experience of naked subordination in slavery and indenture and the more subtle subordination in the post-emancipation period of colonialism must inform a theological search with an insight into the dangers of certain kinds of social structures and personal relationships. Third, the interplay of fusion and fission in the Caribbean which characterizes its society should direct the Caribbean theologian to a theology of integration or wholeness.

There is a profound difference between the white Spanish and Portuguese immigrants who went to the Americas in the Columbus era; the white immigrants who went to North America in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the one hand; and the coloured immigrants brought to the West Indies to serve the plantations in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the other. The former took their God, their saints, and their symbols to continents where they, or at least the upper crust of their kind, were masters, and thus they transferred largely intact both the outward and visible signs as well the inner and spiritual norms of their faith. These may have suffered a slight sea change but did not undergo a metamorphosis.

But this was not true of the religious beliefs of the majority of the slaves brought to the Caribbean. They were taken from tribes and communities where life was impregnated with ancestors, dieties and spirits in ways so integral that the wrenching away from a tribe was often like the cutting of an umbilical cord. Besides, many African or tribal cosmologies do not travel well since they are either

localized in space or depend on the movement on the whole tribe to survive untruncated. Further, the context of the Africans' life under slavery gave them little place for the attempt to reknit their shattered traditions, because this was considered too dangerous for the slave system: conferring as it did solidarity on the slaves and therefore making protest more possible and organized.

But the African slaves adapted their old range of sensitivity, if not necessarily the structure of their beliefs, they pooled their West African symbols and rituals to cope with the new environment and the severe regimentation of slavery. The expression of these adaptations had often, perforce, to be overt: it had often to be veiled by forms, borrowed from the masters, and it was often an unconscious synthesis of a number of tribal West African beliefs, responses to phenomena and antidotes to crises, informed by a new geographical framework, and by the powerful presence and patterns of the slave system and the whites.

The result was creole folk culture - an existence with strong elements drawn from high tribal traditions but non-literary, unformulated in its reflections, inarticulate in terms of the language of the masters, and therefore basically an existence without a special identity. For identity is the relationship between an item of belief, a form of ritual, or even an individual person to a recognized tradition with its own accepted framework, its hierarchy of values, its internal symbolic connections. The creole folk culture of the Caribbean has no such relationship to any high tradition. It often co-exists with christianity, borrowing certain symbols from it, splicing its own symbols onto christian ones, but having neither the quality of a subsidiary or a heresy because it does not start from the same first principles and moves to different positions; nor having the quality of an alternative because it possesses certain distinct first principles from which a set of other principles follows.

But what this folk culture lacked in identity, it made up for in durability. For a very long time it did not have the exposition of savants but it certainly evoked the enthusiasm of devotees. And this is not surprising: it is after all part of the psychic structure of large numbers of West Indian peasants and working-class people, as well as of those of the upper classes though they often refuse to admit it, and it expresses itself in dance, drumming, spirit-possession, and the rituals which precede or follow what the anthropologists call "the rites of passage".

Modern Americans in order to re-establish a healthy relationship between mind and body, often hold "celebrations of the body". West Indians have, for a long time, been celebrating the "spirit" by making the body its medium. One can almost say that the West Indian response to reality is rhythm, and their response to unreality is rhetoric. Or, with apologies to McLuhan, in the Caribbean the body is the belief. We are sacramentalists without the benefit of the term. Until almost yesterday the christian churches have dismissed this range of sensitivity and its concomitant ritual forms as "superstition" - survivals from Africa and slavery which time, education, christian doctrine, and possibly prosperity would earase. But the school of West Indian novelists, dramatists, poets, painters, sculptors and choreographers which have emerged between the Wars and after the Second World War, those sensitive antennae of the Caribbean soul, have seen this matter differently. They have given new dimension and intelligibility to these rituals, perceived the cosmic in what insensitive observers saw as merely the comic, and they have begun to tell what Caribbean Man is like in the depths of his being - that is, when you strip off the respectable over-layer of Europe, the posings and posturings which point the minds of educated West Indians in one way whilst their bodies point another.

The theologians could-in fact must- take a leaf out of the artists' book. For the theologian is an important part of the process which makes the unconscious conscious - which plumbs the depths of men and which holds up to them not so much a model already formed (for that asks them to be what they cannot be) but a mirror which shows them as they are. There is an element of the prophetic in this sort of activity. It was the work of the great prophets of the Jews to detect the essential characteristics of the Jewish people, to strip them bare of the matter of spurious accretions which they were urgently acquiring from contact with their neighbours. Having discovered the essential, the prophets gave it an historical dimension - in short they proclaimed that because the Jews possessed certain characteristics they could respond to the Lord of History in certain ways.

This too is the job of the Caribbean theologian: to find the essential stuff of which Caribbean Man is made, if you like the plastic clay, and to give it the dimension of history, in other words, to turn it in the direction of responding to the central challenge in the historical process, God, in a way commensurate with the basic material.

The West Indian theologian is therefore an integral part of the process known as the search for identity. This process seems roughly to fall into two parts: the first I have already hinted at, the discovery of the basic material stripped of over-layers imposed by other people. The second part of the process consists of a conscious creation of an intellectual tradition which is born of the way Caribbean Man looks at his history - history in both senses of the word, that is, the relationship between past experience and present structures, and the response to events happening now - which response is really the continuous activity of self-creation.

And in the formation of this tradition the theologian has to underline an insight absolutely crucial for West Indian man; the doctrine of freedom or, to put it another way, seeing man as a co-creator with God.

When a West Indian looks at his history he notices that fundamental to its development was the notion of "control" - the manipulation of large numbers of people by a tiny few. Slavery was a system of naked subordination, the essence of which was to make of men at one level automata of production, and at another level to imbue them with the notion that history was not their business. It was enacted upon them but not by them so that they would remain obedient by behaviour, inferior by biology, and acquiescent by attitude; in short, that they would come to regard the given order of things as the natural and indestructable one. When slavery was abolished in some places it was followed by a system of indenture, not so naked in its control but still pernicious in its effects. For it continued the structure of manipulation but added the theory of godfatherly benevolence - paternalism - which aimed to make the men caught in that system barter freedom for security. But even where indenture did not exist the assumptions of those who make policy after slavery was abolished was the control of the blacks, educating them to order and deference (but not to responsibility and the conscious choosing of alternatives to the imperial system) and so making dependence the prime factor of their lives.

When therefore West Indians look back on their history they find that it was a process in which their verbs were - with certain significant exceptions - in the passive voice. They did not make history even though they sometimes disturbed it.

It is against this historical experience that theologian sets the concept of freedom: man, West Indian Man, creatively responding to challenges contained in historical events in the active rather than the passive voice. West Indian Man becomes by this theology "homo faber" - man the creator - whose aim is to consciously remodel his society in order to erase from its structures precisely the elements of manipulation and the psychology of dependence which the colonial relationship had created. For if these structures remain as they are then despite the occasional flurry of protest, the marches and counter-marches, West Indian Man will merely continue to see his history as ordered elsewhere, no longer perhaps in Whitehall but possibly in Washington. The doctrine of man, the co-creator with God, is of course a high doctrine of man in relation to the historical process. It is a doctrine which the West Indian theologian has to demarcate clearly and carefully. But it can have all sorts of fruitful offsprings: it will obviously affect the theological approach to work, to the political processes in being in Caribbean societies, and to the theology of education and the Arts. In the churches, it can lead to more conscious experimentation of risk-taking, more attempts to bring people's ritual into the people's worship, certainly it can lead to less hierarchial structures and to an emphasis on the creative possibilities of Caribbean Man as over against the uncreativity or the sterility of sin. For sin in the West Indies can be seen as collective sterility fathering an individual indulgence or a parasitic approach to others.

There are two concepts of freedom which the theologians have to face in their attempt to make a West Indian man a creative being. The first is really the concept of laissez-faire, by which individuals and groups conceive freedom of action as the war of all upon all; by which they turn pressures upon them into entrepreneurial opportunity, believing that some invisible regulating mechanism beyond their or anybody else's control will make a system and even a blessing out of this chaos of wills. The second concept of freedom puts man in a position of being the prime mover of his own purposes, of being able if not totally to order things at least to respond to events in such a way that his purposes remain intact even though he may have to take directions other than those he envisaged. The first concept is a way of reacting to events and so of confirming an already existing system. The second concept is a way of responding to events and so of continuously creating new systems. In fact the theologian in the Caribbean cannot be a bed-fellow of the determinist. And this is really another way of saying that he has to have a positive concept of the power of freedom in history.

But in order to possess a sense of freedom West Indian Man must also have a sense of wholeness. For as long as there are deep cleavages within his personality which may give him a neurotic desire for power over others but not a healthy desire to use power co-operatively with others; and as long as there are deep cleavages in the society which make men assume separate identities in self-defense and so emotionally look outside their society for succour, then West Indians will remain "mimic men" whose purple rhetoric will merely be the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual disgrace. A theology of integration is therefore a prerequisite to the independence of spirit which makes men want to make history rather than submit to it.

One of the oddest things about West Indian society is the unity which exists in the subconscious and the disunity which exists in the conscious. Let me explain by two examples, one drawn from slavery in Jamaica in the eighteenth century and the other drawn from the black-indian experience in Guyana. In the late eighteenth century in Jamaica locally born white children usually had black slave wet-nurses and nannies. These children sucked not only milk but a lot of the black soul from their wet-nurses in infancy and acquired a great sensitivity to black feeling from their black nannies in childhood. They thus grew up with a split psyche: one part of them rooted in the black soul but the other part of them, as they were educated by their tutors or by their fathers, quickly acquiring the sense of white superiority and the habit of command. The result was that they grew to despise blacks and black habits which had become an integral part of them and a love-hate relationship developed between them and the blacks, a relationship which was often responsible for their need of black people on the one hand and their contempt of them on the other, as well as a relationship which created a dislike of the metropolitan society on the one hand and a compelling dependence of it on the other. This psychological enmeshment coupled with cognitive rejection, has continued in the Caribbean and is probably responsible for the ambivalence of Caribbean Man in his relations with his darker or lighter skinned fellows.

In Guyana after an initial period of strangeness between East Indians and blacks in the early period of immigration from India, the two races came to live in some areas in close proximity to each other. There they began borrowing each other's demons if not each other's divinities, each other's food, each other's psychic responses to natural phenomena and to natural disasters, and even ritual expressions for birth, death and marriage. For instance, the Taja, called in

Trinidad the Hossein, was often as important to the blacks living on Guyanese estates as it was to the Indians. Black men often regarded it as a special privilege to carry the Taja tower in procession and even when I was a child in Guyana blacks and indians took part in the Taja with communal enthusiasm. The Kali-mi-puja which is a spirit-possession ritual from South India drew black participants during the nineteenth century and up to the 1930's. On the other hand East Indians came to believe in the Ole Higue, in obeah, and in those impish spirits of African origins, the bacoos, who are supposed to make pranks on Guyanese villagers.

As the psychic level they shared much but as they began to rationalize and search for identity in the twentieth century they made intellectual conceptions about their own peculiarity and differences which their subconscious structures could not really sustain. Again enmeshment at one level contradicts the estrangement at another. This is one of the most important areas of exploration and formulation for the Caribbean theologian. He has to construct a theology which takes hold of the enmeshment in these relationships and highlights it as well as gives it an intellectual expression. For the schizophrenia implicit in this contradiction of enmeshment and enstrangement is at the bottom of the peculiar tensions of Caribbean society as well as responsible for the cult of borrowed continental identities to cure the schizophrenia and make men feel authentic.

This is the hardest job of the Caribbean theologian; to make the authenticity of Caribbean man something of his own conscious creation, to get him, if you like, to see himself as a genuine ancestor, and not as one in search of ancestors. This is why I have been suggesting all along the emphasis on a prophetic theology which defines the historical moment, draws out its implications and challenges men to respond to these implications in ways that will set or create patterns for their descendants to follow, modify or re-fashion.

The Caribbean theologian has therefore to be something of a creative artist himself -- one who takes elements from many symbolisms and weaves them into patterns which influence thought and therefore action. Caribbean Man will never be whole if he constructs one tradition out of his depths and uses it to dominate all others. In a sense we are back at a theology of absorption which is where christianity faced its first great challenge in the Roman world. Exploration and absorption can make theology fluid and catholic, in a society which must be fluid

because it has no high intransigent tradition to remove and must be catholic
because Caribbean society encompasses many truncated ranges of insights and
cultures. It therefore must reflect in its relationship with history and with God
the weaving of these into a catholic whole.

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